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Source: *Harvard Review*, No. 9 (Fall, 1995), pp. 69-82

Published by: [Harvard Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27560488>

Accessed: 17-03-2016 01:38 UTC

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Sympathy with Nature: Our Romantic Dilemma

This talk is about a certain dilemma that Romantic poets left for poets now to try to solve, about a certain bind, or set of binds, that poets might now try to overcome. I think the subject is important because I have a high idea of poetry, or make a grand claim for it, which is, that poetry imagines and presents a sensibility, often a new sensibility, that shows readers what their sensibility might be. All art does this. For art isn't just what Freud rightly said it was, an illusory satisfying of desires we cannot satisfy in reality. Art has to do also with the directing of desire and the forming of ideals. The unpopularity of poetry at present, when it has so few readers, is in some ways an advantage both to poetry and to society as a whole. As poetry has exited from society, so to speak, it has acquired the right of hermits and other loners to be itself, freely trying out, that is, imagining lifestyles, sensibilities, ways of relating. This is the more important at a time when surely a new imagination of human life is needed. I explore this need in relation to a specific, though still very large question, namely, the relation of human beings to nature, that is, to the environment, to the landscape, to animals, in order to see what relation poets can now imagine as both possible and desirable. It follows from what I've said that though this is a problem for poetry, and, in part, a technical problem of style, what's finally at stake is the way we feel or could possibly feel about nature and how we could relate to it. The question is actual for many persons in the United States and Europe. Let's see what poetry can tell us about it. Since poetry is very honest, it will not forget the difficulties.

Description is the poet's act of love. Or so thought W. P. Ker, the great Edwardian critic. If he's right, poets have always loved nature. Who can forget the horses or the olive trees at Colonus in Sophocles' play? UBI AMOR IBI OCULUS EST. Ezra Pound chiseled that motto late into his *Cantos*. Where love is, the eye is— looking.

In Homer's *Odyssey* the aging dog, Argos, though dying, recognizes Odysseus, who has returned disguised as a beggar to his island home after so many years. In Robert Fitzgerald's translation the passage goes:

While he spoke
an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
but never taken on a hunt before
his master sailed for Troy.

....

But he had grown old in his master's absence.
Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
upon a mass of dung before the gates—

manure of mules and cows, piled there until
fieldhands could spread it on the king's estate.
Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
old Argos lay.

But when he knew he heard
Odysseus' voice nearby, he did his best
to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,
having no strength to move nearer his master.

When Homer reports that Argos put his nose down and flattened his ears, we know that Homer must have observed dogs closely. Moreover, Homer took the dog's gestures, flattened ears, for example, as signs of the dog's emotion, just as we now might, and Homer knew or thought he knew what Argos was feeling. The poet also feels an emotion or mixture of emotions for Argos—pity, sorrow—and this complex of relations to the dog we can call sympathy. Also, Argos is for Homer a metaphor, representing the transition from youth to old age. But Homer's sympathy with the dog isn't of the Romantic kind. Homer doesn't assume a radical difference between the human and the natural. We all end on the dung hill, more or less.

But only after 1730, more than 2000 years later, did description of nature become a *main* subject of poetry. This was a moment huge with future. A big piece of the modern world begins to express itself in poems such as James Thomson's "The Seasons" (1726-30) or William Cowper's "The Task" (1785). In poems ever since, landscapes, trees, flowers, wild creatures, and moods of ocean and sky have served poets as contents, metaphors, symbols, occasions, and dialogic partners. Among the poets who could especially be listed are Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Arnold, Hopkins, Hardy, Lawrence, Williams, Moore, two Thomas, Edward and Dylan, Bishop, Roethke, Hughes. Recently in a review in the *New York Review of Books* (October 20, 1994), Brad Leithauser also mentions May Swenson, Amy Clampitt, and Peter Kane Dufault, whom he's reviewing. Even in our so-called postmodern poetry, which is continually self-undermining, love of nature remains an emotion poets can still sometimes voice without irony. To represent all this poetry of landscape description, I cite the beautiful, late fragment of Ezra Pound:

Do not move
Let the wind speak
that is paradise.

Be silent, the poet says. Get out of the way. Let the other appear, this green world—the only paradise we can have.

I think of Wordsworth standing, in his famous poem, on a ridge above Tintern Abbey, looking over the valley of the Wye river. Wordsworth sees green fields and groves, mountains and sky—also farms and orchards. For human beings are present in the landscape Wordsworth looks at, but they are unobtrusive, seem part of nature or accord with it. This is Wordsworth's ideal.

He describes a scene of peace and harmony. However, in the scene are wisps of smoke curling above the trees. They also suggest the presence of human beings, and the poet guesses that the smoke comes from the fires of vagrants, or maybe of a hermit. Why vagrants? Why a hermit? Because, of course, a vagrant is only transient in nature. A hermit has fled from mankind to nature. In the vagrant and the hermit, human beings don't disturb nature's order. This relieves a fear that the green world of nature, the only paradise we can know, ceases to be a paradise as soon as there are human beings in it.

In actual fact—let's note—the smoke Wordsworth saw came, as of course he knew, from charcoal burners in the woods—from workers who felled the trees and converted the wood into charcoal. And the wisps of smoke also came from steel mills along the Wye river, burning the charcoal to melt the ore. Industry polluted the landscape Wordsworth saw, though not the one his poem describes. He elided the charcoal burners and steel mills.

For academic criticism—at least for much of it at present—the Romantic landscape is ideological. As it banishes people from its perspectives, the Romantic landscape also banishes economics, politics, and history. While we read landscape poetry, we aren't conscious of the persecutions and the injustice, the poor, the hungry, the unemployed. We are less likely to throw a bomb. This is the argument of academic critics.

And it's right, but the enormous appeal of landscape poetry isn't mainly ideological in this vaguely Marxist sense. Landscape poetry erects nature as an other to man, and projects onto nature many things that human beings want and do not have: eternity, or, at least, no consciousness of time; immortality, or, at least, no consciousness of death; innocence or, at least, no consciousness of guilt; instinct, that is, spontaneity, action without reflection, without self-criticism, without self-division; calm, peace, harmony. This is why I say that Romantic nature poetry posits a fundamental *difference* between man and nature. Having projected onto nature qualities we do not possess but would like to, the Romantic naturally wishes to cross the divide he has imagined, to become like nature, to take on its permanence, spontaneity, vitality, etc. This crossing over or becoming one with nature is the fundamental plot of a great many Romantic lyrics.

It's indeed suggestive that, historically, landscape poetry began to be written at a time when, at least in Great Britain, the industrial revolution was also beginning. The "dark, Satanic mills," as William Blake called them, were looming by the rivers, the growing cities were engulfing the countryside. So it's easy to speculate that landscape poetry was an unconscious compensation. But in making this connection between Romanticism and industrialism, as so many people do, we should keep in mind the limitations of such historical reasoning. Whatever a historian can explain in one way, he can always explain in another way, and history can never conclusively explain any happening. The beginnings of landscape poetry coincided in time not only with the industrial revolution, but also and equally with great changes in rural life, with a demographic explosion, with British imperialism and

colonialism, with patriotic sentiment during wars, with a weakening of religious belief among intellectuals, with a culture of sensibility or sentiment, and with a revolution in epistemology. I could build bridges, plausible ones, from any of these developments to landscape poetry. The historical context of any fact is infinite and therefore the historical explanation of it is endless.

Furthermore, didn't human beings pollute the landscape before the eighteenth century? Certainly. And since Wordsworth's time there's been a vast spread of cities and suburbs, a huge increase in smokestacks and asphalt? Certainly. Do poets now write more landscape poetry, or with intenser feeling than did Wordsworth, Hölderlin. or Keats? Certainly not. Poetry is one series, and economic life another. Intuitively, as I said, it seems that the two series must be connected. But try to prove it!

Whatever the historical causes, nature poetry expresses both a love of landscape and a sense of guilt toward it, and these are certainly connected dialectically. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, in her recent book about cats, says that in the old days, when the African bushmen made a kill, they apologized to the animal's spirit. Often so-called primitive peoples blow tobacco smoke into the nostrils of the animal they've killed or offer it other gifts or pleasures. Underlying such rituals, there's a sense of guilt and a fear of revenge. Perhaps we still dimly harbor similar feelings, both the environmentalist and the real estate developer.

However, I don't for a moment believe in spirits of animals or even of nature. In one of his poems, called "Nutting," Wordsworth describes himself as a child plundering or figuratively raping a hazel grove, and then, at the end, models a different, more utopian relation to nature. "Dearest Maiden," he says, invoking a virgin as an ideal opposite to his unvirginal desires,

move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch— for there is a spirit in the woods.

But I don't believe there's a spirit in the woods, and if we wish not to destroy the woods, we will have to find a better reason.

We might ask ourselves, who are we shooting if we shoot a deer? Who suffers ethnic cleansing as our profitable suburbs spread through hills and valleys? Who falls when the saw bites the tree? The answer is, just deer, coyotes, hawks, trees— no spirits. Are we injuring ourselves when we injure them? Of course not. And yet William Blake thought so. He wrote,

Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.

This is one of the outrageous aphorisms in "Auguries of Innocence" that stops you, makes you look for the sense in which this statement, that seems implausible, might nevertheless be true. Is there a sense in which we not only suffer with the hunted hare, but also do ourselves injury as we injure it?

I don't believe at all in nature spirits, as I said, but I take for granted that human being project *their* spirits into natural creatures and objects. We identify with hares, trees, even with lakes and mountains. We can't help doing so. Because of this spontaneous, imaginative act, this identification and sympathy, as *they* are injured, we feel that we ourselves are injured. We look at ourselves from the hare's point of view. Or, in the movie, *The Bear*, we see the hunter as the bear might. We fear, and therefore hate, ourselves, for in our imagination the violated and also the violator—both of them—are us.

To sum up: love of nature, as a theme in poetry, is deeply motivated, I think, by human self-hatred. Hatred not only of each person for herself or himself, but a general hatred of human beings for human kind. Hatred not only of what we are in ourselves, but of what we are in relation to the nature we idealize or with which we identify. The stages of this psychic process are: we feel our own limitations and imagine nature to be without these limitations. Hence we desire to escape into nature or merge with it. Because of the way we imagine nature, we see mankind as nature's violator or despoiler, and hate ourselves. "Peaceful scene," writes Hölderlin, in David Ferry's splendid translation, and he goes on to describe the scene:

Peaceful scene: the sunlight on the lawns;
the shadowy branches over the dry paths;
the smoke blossoming from the chimney tops;
the lark song almost lost in the perfect sky;
the sheep and cattle feeding in the fields,
well-tended; the snow in the high meadows, flowering.

Value shining and flourishing everywhere.

But of course neither this scene nor any other sight in nature is actually peaceful or perfect, only such poetry is. We *imagine* that it's peaceful because we need to believe that such peace is possible, that such paradisaic moments are possible. "Was hier wir sind, wird dort ein Gott ergänzen," writes Hölderlin in one of his late fragments—"what we are here, a God will there complete/ with harmony, and eternal reward and peace." But it's Hölderlin himself—the poet—who does this completing and harmonizing. And, to repeat, as we imagine that nature is the locus of order and peace, of "Value shining and flourishing everywhere," as David Ferry puts it—as we do this, we necessarily imagine ourselves as intruders upon nature, disturbers. The most sensitive of us try to do as little harm as possible. The poets imagine, in compensation, situations where we'd do no harm at all.

At this point I want to dwell for a moment on the idea of looking. This lecture is in part a dialogue with John Ruskin, and Ruskin said: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way." Since human beings get their information much more from their eyes than from their other senses, no one can be surprised that so much poetry describes things seen. But nature poetry presents things in lots of visual detail, describing much more than we'd need if the purpose were

merely to recognize things, to see what they are. Trout, for example. For what purpose does Gerard Hopkins need to describe the color, shape, and arrangement of their spots? Rosy and dark, round dots— says Hopkins— as though the sides of the trout were painted in stipple:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim.

This lavish description we might call aesthetic; we might call love. But there's still another implication of it. In poetry about nature the act of looking implies keeping a distance, not touching, not biting. Eric Ericson remarks that looking is biting at a distance. He's speaking of the development of babies. The remark explains why, in nature poetry, images of touch and taste, such as in Keats,

Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose

...

Or on the wealth of globed peonies,

strike us as so powerfully sensuous and at the same time as vaguely infantile and disturbing. Keats wants to put the rose in his mouth, his hand around the peonies. Looking models a different relation to nature, one that now seems better to us, because looking doesn't invade, doesn't harm.

Gary Snyder is an American poet of about my age. Many years ago, when he was a college student, he spent a summer on Sourdough Mountain, in the Pacific Northwest, as a fire lookout, in other words, he was stationed there to spot and report forest fires. He described this experience in a poem called "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout."

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air.

Obviously this was a good moment, one that stands out in memory. Ideas of height, purity, stillness, and transparency suggest the quality of the moment. Height equals distance. From what? From friends; the poet is alone. From human material culture. He drinks snow-water from the humblest of tools, a tin cup. Distance from intellectual culture. "I cannot remember things I once read." Distance from cities. The valley, with its smoke, heat, and flies forms a transitional zone between the city and the remote mountain top. From its first line to its last the poem moves from valley to mountain summit. In nature Snyder simply looks. He doesn't disturb. In order to describe nature at all, a

human consciousness must of course be implied. In this poem, the reader's consciousness of a human consciousness is somewhat suppressed. For example, the poet doesn't name or describe his feelings. He writes in grammatical fragments, and so can elide the subject, the "I." The poem ends on the "high still air." As the medium through which he looks, the air in no way occludes or even colors what is seen. It's a metaphor for the poem's style, at least for an ideal style, which would present what is seen, only that, and transmit it—it rather than the speaker, the landscape rather than the human consciousness.

My argument thus far, in summary, has been that love of nature, as a major theme of poetry, may or may not be part of a cultural counter movement to industrialization. If it is, nature poetry is partly ideological. Also it's a psychological compensation, in the sense that what we cannot have in reality we try to have in art. Love of nature is further, more dimly, a kind of propitiation, expressing our guilt toward an imaginary spirit we have injured. And love of nature is an oblique expression of human self-hatred, arising in a psychological bind. We project our desires for spontaneity, unity, and peace into nature, and then hate ourselves as the violators of nature. When a human being enters a natural scene, he or she brings human unrest into it, thus violating it, and therefore feels guilty, thus further disturbing the peace of nature. Once you idealize nature, you must turn against humanity as its despoiler. We identify with natural objects and creatures, and feel horror at destroying them. Hence we write poems, such as Wordsworth's or Gary Snyder's, that posit an ideal relationship of human beings to nature, in which humans would be loving, not destroying, that is, merely looking. But we know that such poems are unreal, utopian.

In working on this lecture, I planned at one time to try to answer in advance criticisms you might raise. But there isn't time, and some criticisms are irrefutable. So I'll notice only one. The word "we" has been used. In sentences that assert how *we* feel about nature. But who is this *we*? Why, poets, of course. But only some poets, not all. Who else, beside some poets? Am I talking about mankind in general, or about an elite or lunatic few? Ronald Reagan, for example, is presumably not one of *we*. He is said to have said, "when you've seen one tree, you've seen them all." As William Blake remarked, "the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way." So when I say, "we," who and how many are included? Is *we* perhaps merely *I*? We—you and I—knew already that literary criticism is a mode of autobiography or confession.

So much for objections. To go forward, now, with the argument, I go back to Gary Snyder's poem. It has no metaphors, no comparisons of anything to anything. Well, that's not quite right. Transparency and stillness of the mountain air can be taken, I said, as metaphors for a style of poetry, a way of writing. The poem is a metaphor for a spiritual state. But formally the poem has no metaphors, just flat, factual statements. You might also use the word metonymy, if you were trying to show how Snyder's declarative, prosaic phrases create an illusion of reference, of the reality of the things

mentioned.

But there's a deeper reason for avoiding metaphor, a moral reason. Metaphor is the trope of transformation, the trope by which the imagination changes one thing into another thing. The swan has "gondoliering legs," writes Marianne Moore, changing the swan into a gondolier.

The Catterpillar on the leaf,
Repeats to thee thy Mother's grief,

writes William Blake, seeing the caterpillar as a baby, helpless and wriggling. Snyder would wish to avoid metaphor, I believe, because it exerts a human power over things. "Let the wind speak," wrote Ezra Pound. But here's the bind. In a poem, the wind cannot speak, only the poet. So long as the poem is a metaphor, it is likely to speak about the poet or about humanity in general, not about nature.

To show how much this is true, I exhibit a poem that seems of all poems the most sympathetic to nature, Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," a series of aphorisms. An augury is a little thing in which great things can be read.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

Many of these auguries express sympathy for helpless animals—the robin in a cage, the horse misused, the starving dog, the skylark wounded by a hunter. The poem is usually read as a sublime protest and warning against maltreatment of animals:

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A dove house fill'd with doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro' all its regions.
A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.
A Horse misus'd upon the Road
Calls to Heaven for Human blood.
Each outcry of the hunted Hare
A fibre from the Brain does tear.
A Skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.
The Game Cock clip'd & arm'd for fight
Does the Rising Sun affright.
Every Wolf's & Lion's howl
Raises from Hell a Human Soul.
The wild deer, wand'ring here & there,
Keep the Human Soul from Care.

Notice that sympathy with nature leads to enmity to mankind, the tormenter of nature. The aphorisms voice outrage, denunciation, and menace.

And yet, in these brilliant aphorisms, the animals are, in fact, emblems, allegories, or symbols of humanity.

A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.

The aphorism threatens that the transcendent and divine sympathizes with the caged bird, even if mankind doesn't.

But Blake didn't believe in heaven, not, that is, according to the traditional, Christian concept. His heaven was the imagination. He's no longer using the irony of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," where he associates imagination with hell fire. He means that a caged bird offends our imagination because we identify with it.

Blake also means something more. Why deprive the wild bird of its liberty? Why keep it in a cage? So as to have it, possess it, care for it, love it. The lines denounce the terrible desire to keep what you love in a cage. More specifically, the robin is a metaphor of male sexuality, of its natural freedom, of the cruelty of the social laws and customs that confine it. My point is, Blake exploits a robin to talk about something else.

A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State.

The innocent eye sees a political augury in a starved dog. How can this augury be true? Blake didn't mean merely that, as Harold Bloom puts it, "the impairment of one life lessens all." The dog is Blake's metaphor of the beggar, the starving person who becomes revolutionary because he's starved. The horse is a slave. The "Game Cock clipp'd & arm'd for fight" is a soldier. A skylark sings in flight, high up in the sky. When it's shot and wounded in the wing, it cannot fly and doesn't sing.

A skylark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.

The Cherubim is a heavenly angel. Why does it cease to sing? Not because of a mystical sympathy between larks and angels. The lark *is* the cherubim. The claim made is for the power of metaphor, or of the imagination, that can see a lark as a cherubim. "What," Blake imagined someone questioning him, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'"

So these aphorisms, that express sympathy for the animals, also appropriate them, transform them, make them into means of talking about something else. Blake was perfectly aware of this. He felt guilty because of it. You see this in the next aphorism:

Every Wolf & Lion's howl
Raises from Hell a Human Soul.

The domesticated animals are symbols of the human mind in cages of social

customs and received ideas. This is a hell. The wild animals— wolf and lion— are metaphors of uncaged minds that, as they express themselves, free us from the hell of convention. But Blake also means, as a secondary implication, that we are redeemed from guilt as we hear the animals we haven't domesticated. Take the next one:

The wild deer, wand'ring here & there,
Keep the human soul from Care.

When you look at the wild deer you feel free and wild too. No, that isn't quite what Blake meant. The wild deer are a metaphor of the mind that wanders freely. Yes. But also, in the wild deer we see an animal that human beings haven't caged. The deer don't free us from the guilt of caging things, but at least they show that we haven't caged everything. I might add, however, that in fact wild deer seem to be full of care, extremely wary and suspicious. The older they become, the warier they are. Blake didn't know much about deer. He knew his own feelings, and used deer to express them. This is what poets do. Is it what they must do?

On 15 April, a Thursday, in 1802, William and Dorothy Wordsworth were on a hike. By the shore of Lake Ullswater they saw a lot of daffodils tossing in the wind. They both wrote descriptions of this sight, Dorothy in her *Journal* and William in a famous poem, and there are some interesting differences.

Let's look first at Dorothy's journal entry:

When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow Park we saw a few daffodils close to the water-side. We fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore, and that the little colony had so sprung up. But as we went along there were more and yet more; and at last, under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful. They grew among the mossy stones about and about them; some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness; and the rest tossed and reeled and danced, and seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind, that blew upon them over the lake; they looked so gay, ever glancing, ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here and there a little knot, and a few stragglers a few yards higher up; but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity, unity, and life of that one busy highway.

Dorothy projected human feelings into the flowers, described them as though they were human beings. Some rested their heads for weariness. Others reeled and danced in the wind and seemed to laugh. Thus Dorothy surrounded herself with a world she could love, and that is what we all want. Yet I'm sure poets now ought not to personify nature as Dorothy does. What especially I'd like you to notice is that Dorothy remarks differences. Most of the daffodils, she says, made a belt or highway, but there were also a few

stragglers or separate little knots of flowers. Most were dancing in the wind, but some rested their heads on the stones.

William treats the flowers much more high-handedly. He drops the stragglers and weary ones from his picture, and makes all the flowers do the same thing. To my feeling, it's not a nice way to treat them. He also drops Dorothy from the occasion. She uses the pronoun "we" several times in her journal, thus including William in the scene. Feminists may say what they like, but I think William omitted Dorothy not because she was a woman but because she was another human being. To suggest, in the poem, a loving companionship with another person would undermine the poem's existential themes—loneliness, separateness, emptiness, pensiveness, joylessness.

Writing a journal, Dorothy could describe what she saw, that merely—though incidentally, of course, she reveals her emotion, her identification with the flowers, her spontaneous, imaginative animating of them. A poem, William supposed, is more carefully composed than a journal entry and has a more considered or deeper meaning. As William looked at this entry in Dorothy's journal, his problem, in turning it into a poem, was to make it an important statement. Description of landscape wasn't enough to make a poem. The landscape had to signify something more than itself. And so William converted Dorothy's notations into a symbolic landscape, a scene of sparkling light on land and water in which the wind is the divine spirit in everything, the one life in each and all. Dorothy's response to the scene was aesthetic. William made the scene an epiphany.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

This poem is justly famous, but famous, perhaps, for the wrong reason. As a composition, it's wonderfully dramatic and paradoxical. The paradox is that union with nature comes only afterwards and in a lonely room. In other words, the poet can be one with the daffodils only when he's not with the daffodils; more exactly, as Coleridge pointed out, he cannot be one with the daffodils at all, since he cannot be conscious of being not conscious. But the poem is famous less for its surprise and paradox than as a model of sensibility, a convincing expression of love of nature, and in this role it's dubious, for the poem hardly looks at the flowers, though it tells a great deal about the poet.

To this point I haven't explicitly underscored an analogy that's been implicit in this talk throughout. The poetic imagination is like the profitable suburbs of Los Angeles that spread over hills and canyons and utterly transform them. It's like any of the innumerable economic activities by which human beings appropriate the natural world and exploit it for their own use. I don't know whether this is a good analogy. Probably it isn't. But still it may trouble those of us who would like to imagine a less exploitive relation to nature. How is it possible to write about nature without appropriating it? Without transforming it? Would we recognize such a writing, if it could be produced, as a poem? What would such a poem be?

No one knows, for such a poem hasn't yet been written. Clearly the Romantic tradition—Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman—is deeply exploitive and must be rejected. The nature poem of the future would avoid the pronoun “I,” for it would present the landscape and not the poet. For the same reason it would not be metaphorical, that is, the poem would not make the landscape express human preoccupations or emotions. This will be difficult, probably impossible. There are few precedents. But let's add, so as not to be misunderstood, that metaphors are all right as devices for a more precise, objective description. When Elizabeth Bishop writes that a pelican crashes into the water like a pickaxe, she's not appropriating and transforming the pelican in order to talk about herself. She merely directs attention to the particular character of the pelican's plunge—its suddenness and heaviness.

In some cases it's hard to know whether the emotion we attribute to natural objects belongs really to them or to us. On the whole, the new poetry of nature probably will not evoke much emotion. We can reasonably guess at the emotions of higher animals, such as cats or Konrad Lorenz's geese, since their emotions seem not to differ much from ours. But what can we report about the emotional life of lower animals, such as limpets and snails, not to mention daffodils and waves? Any emotion we suppose in them can only be our own projected emotion.

So I'm depriving the new nature poetry of metaphorical significance and of emotion, and that's why I wonder if this poetry, supposing it were ever written, would be recognized as poetry. Probably, in still another austerity,

this new poetry would not be composed in grammatical sentences but in fragments, for grammar imposes a human order on nature. So does language, as poets have long regretted, and a logical lover of nature would not write at all, but poetry exists only by compromising with its ideals.

I've been looking through modern poems. Though the poem I'm looking for seems not to have been written, hints of such a poem are frequent. One sees what the poem might be like if only the whole poem resembled some of its lines. My eye happens to fall on a line of Robinson Jeffers: "Four pelicans went over the house." The poem from which this line comes is a disgrace to mankind, but the factuality of the line is all right, especially the counting—four pelicans. Counting gives a reassurance of reality and objectivity, as do specifications of date, time, and place. Also Jeffers locates the pelicans in relation to the observer—over the house—for this is also important in accurate descriptions.

What poets can learn from Ezra Pound is not yet exhausted. In Canto 2 Pound gives a shore scape in a couple of details—birds stretching their wings and water splashing in hollows. He doesn't write "wings" but is more specific and concrete—"wing-joints." And his eye differentiates between the rock hollows and the sand hollows on the beach:

Sea-fowl stretching wing-joints,
splashing in rock-hollows and sand-hollows
In the wave-runs by the half dune.

This particularity, detail, and differentiation belong to the morality of looking.

As I said at the start, in speaking of Homer, Romantic love of nature is premised on a fundamental difference or huge gap between the human and the natural. Man is not nature, that is, not immortal, not instinctive, not unified, not all the other qualities the Romantic bestows on nature. There are some signs in modern poetry of a different sympathy with nature, more like Homer's for the dog Argos, based on a feeling of likeness. When Jorie Graham speaks of a bird as a "fistful of time and sinew," the words might describe any creature, which is indeed the point. In speaking of the bird, Graham isn't using the bird to speak of us, but, instead, she's including us with the bird—puffs of life subject to natural laws.

In a late poem of Robert Lowell, called "Shifting Colors," the poet thinks of animals and plants doing interesting things, differentiated things—things that his eye doesn't relate to each other or to himself.

A hissing goose sways in stationary anger;
purple bluebells rise in ledges on the lake.

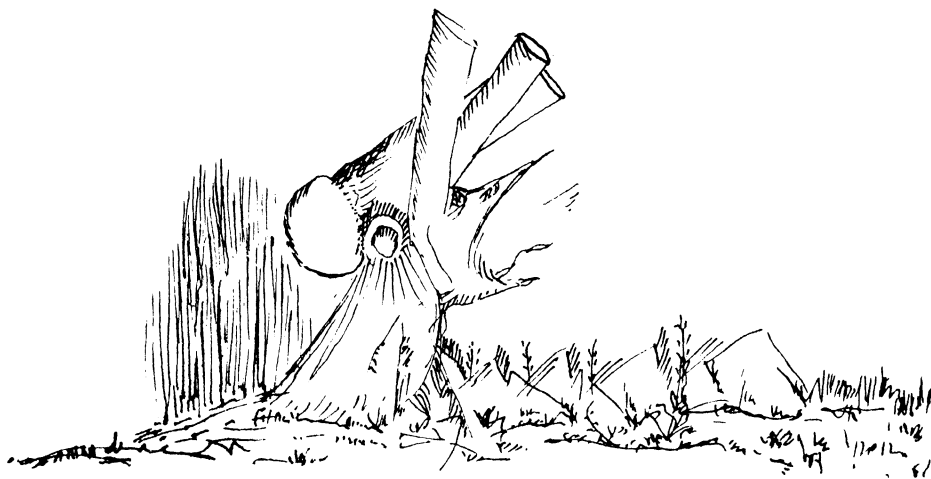
A single cuckoo gifted with a pregnant word
shifts like the sun from wood to wood.

...

I see
horse and meadow, duck and pond,
universal consolatory

description without significance,
transcribed verbatim by my eye.

I've been assuming that people would like to love nature the way they'd like to be loved. And I assume that we'd not like our lovers to make us into metaphors, though this happens often enough. Our impossible wish is to be loved for ourselves, which means we'd like to be known as we really are and, amazingly, to find ourselves valued. We don't want to be loved for qualities we don't have or for useful ones we may have. We want someone to value our selves, our being. Whether poems can love nature this way is the question. But let's, as poets, try, on behalf of the human species.



This lecture, sponsored by the Poetry Room and the Department of English and American Literature and Language, was given in the Lamont Forum Room on 3 November 1994.